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LOS ANGELES TIMES
12 July 1980

HOSTAGE TRAIL ENDS WITH INTERROGATION

'You Are Spying,' U.S. Journalists Told

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ESFAHAN, Iran—The chief inquisitor's eyes bore in on mine. He smiled a thin, triumphant smile.

"You are spying for the CIA," he said with an air of finality.

No, I said, I am a journalist, and there is a difference between journalists and spies.

The inquisitor laughed. "Do you think we are naive?" he asked. "Even the CIA says it uses journalists as spies."

Not me, I said. And I began to worry. Even if I could prove to these 25-year-old revolutionary guards that I was a journalist, to them that meant that I was the same as a spy.

(In April, speaking at a meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, CIA Director Stansfield Turner said the agency will consider using journalists for intelligence purposes when the desired results cannot be obtained any other way.)

(Responding to objections by the editors, Turner said, "What you are saying is that if you accept an assignment from me to get some information that can be very vital to our country; that you have lost your freedom. I don't understand that.")



(Turner, who attended a private luncheon in Los Angeles on Friday at the 20th Century-Fox Film Corp. studios, declined to comment on the incident in Esfahan.)

With another reporter, Jay Ross of the Washington Post, I had come to investigate reports that some of the hostages from the U.S. Embassy in Tehran had been moved to a house here. They had; but the militant students were not pleased that we had discovered them, and they handed us over to the revolutionary guards.

"Why should it interest you where the hostages are, or how many are there?" demanded the chief inquisitor, a thin young man with an uneven stubble of beard. "This is not news. This is not journalism. This is taking secrets."

It is a journalist's job to gather information, I said lamely. "It is a spy's job," he corrected.

Another militant joined in: "Did you study at a journalism school?" he asked.

No, I said truthfully. History.

"Then you cannot be a journalist," he said.

I supplied almost two hours' worth of such self-incriminating answers. Then I was locked inside a tiny room with a filthy mattress and stacks of popular music tapes, which are outlawed and confiscated in this Islamic republic.

It was Ross's turn to be interrogated.

Two hours later, my inquisitor returned, asked some more questions, then left, saying that telephone calls would be made to Tehran.

A half-hour later, a key turned in the door. "You are free," the inquisitor said.